

PRACTICAL REASONING IN A SOCIAL WORLD

How we act together

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CHAPTER I

Practical reasoning in context

Human beings, we can be sure, have always disagreed about what there is reason to do. But the nature of the disagreements, and the views that we can form about how to deal with them, will vary with context. In this chapter I outline the broad modern context of practical disagreement, survey some of the strategies available for dealing with it, and locate my own project in relation to them. This is necessary for establishing what I shall *assume* as much as what I shall argue for. It also enables me to begin the examination of the doctrine of the distinctness of persons and to indicate the problems connected with it.

I.1 THE MODERN CONTEXT

It is commonly observed that the *disenchantment* of the modern world has rendered it a place of hard realities, investigable by the methods of modern science, and at the same time divested it of values.¹ Many people no longer believe that we can simply infer our values from some set of premises about the natural order and our place in it, because they no longer believe that brute nature has the teleological character which would be necessary for that process of inference even to be possible. That problem is exacerbated because the loss of belief in a purposive *natural* order is often accompanied by the lack of belief in a purposive *social* order. Indeed, even talk of a social *order* may seem anachronistic in a world which is now so fluid and mobile that social identities are no longer fixed. Perhaps there were earlier times when a clear understanding of your social position allowed you to make inferences about what to do, but those times have gone. In the circumstances of social flux and mobility, any reference to 'my station and its duties' as the source of values would

¹ For recent discussion, see for example Benhabib 1992: 41, 152–4; Hollis 1998: 83, 88–9; Korsgaard 1996: 1–5, 18–19; Sandel 1982: 175–6; and Scheffler 1992: 14–15.

for many people simply raise the prior question of how one is to decide what one's station is.² If meaning and purpose are excluded from the natural world and it is also impossible to infer conclusions about values from our position in the social world, then it seems we must somehow construct our own values.

I speak with deliberate ambiguity of *values*, by which I mean the thoughts which inform practical reasoners' decisions about how to act, about what states of affairs are worth realising, about what objectives are worth achieving, and I shall continue to speak of values in this sense. The problem of disenchantment is often couched in terms of specifically *moral* values. Morality and practical reasoning are not the same thing, as I shall be at pains to point out in chapter 6, but there is an overlap, and the same set of difficulties can be raised for the whole process of practical decision, whether it involves decisions from a narrowly moral point of view or not. An investigation of an inert world, it may be felt, can tell us how things are, but it cannot tell us what to do – not even when we are concerned in some general way with decisions about how to act rather than with specific decisions about the moral thing to do. It is the problem of finding reasons for acting in this broader sense, not the sense tied specifically to morality, which is the main focus in this chapter, and more generally in this book.

It is of course possible to exaggerate the extent to which the need to construct values is a product of specifically modern conditions. A certain kind of individuality, as well as a certain social identity, is an ingredient in a human life in all contexts. And it was, after all, in a world long before disenchantment that Spartacus departed from the script and challenged his place as a slave. What is true, however, is that the scope for individuality is probably much greater in modern conditions. At least in many parts of the world we are less bound by traditional roles and expectations, as well as being more mobile in literal and metaphorical senses. It is less predictable at birth where we shall live, what kind of work we shall do and who our circle of acquaintances will be. In modern conditions too the idea of leisure pursuits as a distinct part of life is more entrenched, and with that comes a greater need for choices and decisions.

² F. H. Bradley said that 'collisions of duties are avoided mostly by each man keeping to his own immediate duties, and not trying to see from the point of view of other stations than his own' (Bradley 1876: 198 n. 5). The limitations in this strategy are perhaps evident in P. F. Strawson's report: 'A certain professor once said: "For me to be moral is to behave like a professor"' (Strawson 1961: 33). Critical reflection on one's station is something I am keen to encourage, and in chapter 4, section 3 I argue that mere occupation of a station or membership of a group gives no reason whatever for active identification with it.

I now turn to a separate feature of the present historical context of practical reasoning, namely the fact of *pluralism*. In order to see the bearing of pluralism on practical reasoning, it is useful to conduct the following thought experiment.³ Imagine that the world contains only two human communities. Community A is deeply religious, and its members observe a strict sabbatarianism. They also believe that it is natural for women to be the subordinates of men, so that obedience is regarded as an appropriate relation between a woman and her husband, and women are barred from the same kind of participation in public life as men. They regard abortion as one form of murder, and treat it as such. So far as property is concerned, they believe that it is morally indefensible to deprive anyone of legitimately acquired property except in so far as that might be necessary for purposes of common defence. Community B, by contrast, is wholly secular. Its members believe that they have a right to conduct their leisure time as they see fit as long as they do not infringe the right of others to act similarly. They believe that women and men are equal and strive to ensure that women are represented in public office in just the same way as men. They believe that a woman has a right to control over her own body, and regard the choice of abortion at will as one manifestation of that right. So far as property is concerned, they believe that transfer of property from the better off to the worse off, if necessary by coercion, according to certain defined principles is morally defensible.

Imagine now three different possibilities.

(1) Communities A and B are geographically separated and their members never come into contact or even know of one another's existence.

(2) A persons and B persons do come into contact, but in a peripheral way. Perhaps they have occasion to trade and in that way they come to learn about their differing views about the world, but otherwise they continue to live their lives separately from one another.

(3) There continue to be A persons and B persons but there are no longer two separated communities. There is just one geographical area, in which A persons and B persons live in close proximity.

In example (1) there is, in one clear sense, disagreement between communities A and B. Their respective members hold beliefs which are the contradictories of one another. This is to assume, of course, that beliefs about values express coherent propositional thoughts which can enter into logical relations with one another, and that there are no problems of

³ For the use of similar thought experiments for other purposes, see Nozick 1974: 185 and Gauthier 1986: 219–21.

reference or identification as between the two communities, when they mention, say, an act of abortion. These are philosophically contentious assumptions, but I am prepared to make them. In any event, in another clear sense there is no disagreement between communities A and B. Since they do not even know of one another's existence, there is no occasion when an A person makes a claim which a B person then goes on to dispute.

In example (2) there is liable to be disagreement in the second sense as well as the first. A persons and B persons may well take issue with one another where they differ, so that one will deny what the other asserts. But if we imagine that contact between the communities is minimal, the disagreement may not issue in conflict of any further kind.

In example (3) there will not merely be disagreement in the two senses distinguished. There will be practical difficulties directly connected with the beliefs of A persons and B persons. In acting on the respective beliefs they hold, A persons and B persons will come into conflict. They will be respectively committed to realising states of their world which cannot jointly be realised, and those commitments will arise directly from their beliefs. (Notice, however, that as well as conflict there must also be a level of agreement between A people and B people if they are really to live in the same geographical area on any continuing basis.)

It is the forms of conflict outlined in (3) which most closely mirror the circumstances of much of the contemporary world. There is not just the abstract fact of unwitting attachment to contradictory propositions, nor just the further fact of witting denial of the propositions asserted by someone else. There is, in addition, the fact that manifest doxastic dissension issues in practical dissension. The content of the beliefs in imagined communities A and B was chosen to reflect the content of some of the beliefs which, in the actual world, result in practical conflict between people. We live in a *de facto* pluralist world, that is, a world in which incompatible systems of value as a matter of fact coexist, systems of value whose adherents are led to conflicting commitments and conflicting courses of action in virtue of their espousal of those systems.⁴

No doubt, as with disenchantment, it is possible to exaggerate the novelty of *de facto* pluralism: perhaps earlier societies have been less uniform and homogeneous than we sometimes think. But for all that, our current historical circumstances are distinctive in at least two respects.

⁴ The claim of *de facto* pluralism carries no implication about the status of conflicting values or the possibility of resolving such conflicts. For discussion of those distinct questions, see Berlin 1991: 80, Raz 1986: 395 and Larmore 1994: 61–79.

First, we have an unprecedented accumulation of knowledge of other cultures and their differing values, we are much more aware of how differently people may reason about what is worth doing and what states of the world should be realised.⁵ Secondly, cultures with widely different values have interpenetrated geographically to an unprecedented extent. Is it acceptable or unacceptable to publish pornography, to eat meat, to hang criminals, to wear make-up and a skirt in the street if you are a woman, to wear make-up and a skirt in the street if you are a man, to abort foetuses, to teach children about customs and values different from those they are growing up with? People hold conflicting views on such questions, but the people holding those views are now much more likely than previously to live, literally, next door to one another.

It is not my purpose here to provide developed theories of disenchantment and *de facto* pluralism, or to determine the exact degree of truth in the claim that they are distinctive features of the contemporary world. The strength of fundamentalist religions shows that the disenchantment of the world is less than complete, and the coexistence of many forms of religious belief with one another and with secular beliefs in the contemporary United States makes plain that *de facto* pluralism can thrive where disenchantment is absent. But I hope to have given sufficient characterisation of disenchantment and pluralism to make plain that they are a significant part of the circumstances in which the question 'What reasons do we have for acting?' currently arises. The question is not generated by these circumstances; indeed, it is hardly separable from human action at all, at least in the full-blown form in which it involves conscious choice and decision. Nevertheless, the urgency of the question, the way it is understood, and the range of answers thought acceptable to it are likely to be heavily influenced by these circumstances. Thus, although spatial proximity has not brought into being the question of how to handle widely varying views on acceptable behaviour, it has made that question a much more pressing one at a practical level.⁶ Underlying

⁵ 'Neo-Hegelian and other nostalgic writers typically exaggerate the extent to which any society has ever had a homogeneous outlook, and one may perhaps doubt whether contemporary societies are really more pluralistic in their composition than many societies of the past. But they are certainly more pluralistic in their outlook, and consciously accept that attitudes which are substantively different from one another in spirit and in history actually coexist. People realise, too, that this fact itself makes demands on ethical and political understanding and invention. Meeting those demands provides one dimension of ethical thought that is now particularly important' (Williams 1995a: 139–40).

⁶ '[I]n our world an inability to account for cross-cultural reasoning ultimately has fierce practical consequences. Many contemporary societies are culturally plural; nearly all have significant and varied relations with other, differing societies. A particularist account of ethical relations

the practical question is a theoretical one about how to evaluate reasons for acting, which I do want to address. There is, after all, more than just a practical problem here. People with differing values in a pluralist society are not like two stubborn and aggressive individuals who meet on a narrow bridge and attempt to barge past each other. The practical conflicts of a pluralist society are freighted with *beliefs* about the (not necessarily moral) rightness and wrongness of different courses of action. The question, therefore, is how we arrive at decent beliefs of that kind.

1.2 AUTONOMY AND DISAGREEMENT

We must make decisions about what constitute good reasons for acting. One possible response to this fact is to make a virtue of necessity, to argue that the need to create one's own values is not a predicament to be endured but a state which is itself of enormous value. That response is reflected in our culture in the form of bestowing high importance on *autonomy*, in one sense of that ambiguous term.⁷ Choosing our own forms of behaviour is seen not as something we are stuck with but as something which gives us our dignity, something to be prized. After all, it might be said, endorsing certain values in the light of critical reflection and consideration of alternatives is far more worthy than merely reading them off from a description of the world or finding oneself attached to them by accident of birth or whatever other circumstance. Charles Taylor identifies Herder as one of the early articulators of the idea and paraphrases his thought:

There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's life. But this notion gives

and reasoning that might have been practically adequate in a world of homogeneous, closed societies will almost certainly prove practically inadequate in a world marked by cultural pluralism within states, vastly intricate interregional, international and transnational relationships, and constantly shifting patterns of integration and connection between different spheres of life and different social groups' (O'Neill 1996: 20). 'But typically in our day and age pluralism exists within every society, indeed within every culture. That generates conflict between competing and incompatible activities and ways of life. When valuable alternatives we do not pursue are remote and unavailable, they do not threaten our commitment to and confidence in the values manifested in our own life. But when they are available to us and pursued by others in our vicinity they tend to be felt as a threat' (Raz 1995: 180).

⁷ One ambiguity lies in the fact that the term may be used either to describe a state where individuals choose their values, rather than simply inferring them from data amassed about the world without any original input of their own, or to describe a state where individuals choose their values rather than having them imposed by some other individual(s) or by their social environment. For discussion of the range of uses of the term, and of what can reasonably be expected by way of definition, see Dworkin 1988: 5–20.

a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for *me*. (Taylor 1992: 30)

In the same vein Joseph Raz articulates the ideal of personal autonomy:⁸

The ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives. The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through their own decisions throughout their lives. (Raz 1986: 369)

The preconditions for enjoying such autonomy are ‘appropriate mental abilities, an adequate range of options, and independence’ (372).

The sponsorship of autonomy as specified so far is not something I wish to challenge. It should be noted, however, that, familiar though it may be to me and my likely readers, its sponsorship is not uncontentious. What was described above as ‘endorsing certain values in the light of critical reflection and consideration of alternatives’ might be described by someone less enamoured of autonomy as allowing the rot to set in by being exposed to wicked ways, the very exposure to which will lead people away from virtue. Such a thought might underlie, for example, a resistance to a certain range of curriculum subjects being taught to girls, which it is feared will implant in them the idea that they ought not necessarily to be in a position of unquestioning obedience to their fathers. Or it might underlie the fears on the part of members of the Amish sect that exposure to other ideas and other forms of life will seduce people away from the simple, non-invasive and technologically undemanding life which their sect leads. I find the second example less offensive than the first, but in any case I set aside any difficulties there might be thought to be in defending the importance of autonomy in general.⁹ Instead, I call attention to a number of specific problems which have a bearing on practical reason and will be taken up later in the argument.

Notice, first, a certain elasticity in the ideal: the aspiration is to be *part* author of one’s life and to control *to some degree* one’s own destiny.

⁸ Raz distinguishes between *personal* autonomy and *moral* autonomy. Whereas moral autonomy is a doctrine about the whole of morality, to the effect that it consists in self-enacted principles, personal autonomy is one specific moral ideal (Raz 1986: 370 n. 2).

⁹ One possible defence is developed by Joseph Raz: ‘For those who live in an autonomy-supporting environment there is no choice but to be autonomous: there is no other way to prosper in such a society’ (Raz 1986: 391). See also Kymlicka 1989: ch. 9. This defence will not convince someone who raises doubts about the value of having an autonomy-supporting environment in the first place. For further scepticism see Gray 1996: 150–5.

This is not the accident of one author's formulation; it is, rather, an essential qualification. One aspect of the fact of causal interconnection ensures that anything more than this would be a vain hope. There is, literally, nothing one human being can do without the prior causal input of other human beings, from which it follows that others must always in that straightforward sense be part authors of a person's life. The reasons for making this claim, and the consequences which follow from it, will concern me in chapter 2 (The indistinctness of persons: causal interconnection).

Notice also that, whatever the scope of control over one's own life turns out to be, there is an incompleteness in the ideal of autonomy as articulated. Does the *mere* fact that someone is shaping their life have value independently of the shape which results, or does its having value depend on the nature of the choices that they make in doing so? In other words, does the fact of my choosing a particular course of action carry any weight, on its own, as a reason for so acting, or does it not? If it does, we need to explain why choice as such should have this power (and to make sure that this answer does not yield results we find difficult to live with). If choice does not of itself carry weight, then we still have to ask what are the sources of sound choices. I pursue the question of the independent value of choice in chapter 3, section 7 and chapter 5, section 3.

Notice, next, that the ideal is one of *personal* autonomy. The fact of collective agency creates complications here. It is the autonomy of individuals which is most usually prized in liberal thought, but the idea of *collective* autonomy is not absent: the idea, for instance, that there is a right to national self-determination is fairly strongly entrenched. If collective autonomy were just a kind of shorthand for an accumulation of individual autonomy, then well and good. But if, as I shall suggest in chapter 3, collectivities possess independent importance, then it may follow that their autonomy is also of independent importance. Individual and collective autonomy may then end up fighting for the same space, as it were: it will be necessary to decide how the two kinds of autonomy relate to each other, and whether it is acceptable to say that individual autonomy must always take precedence over any collective autonomy. The tensions between personal and collective demands in general are further discussed in chapter 6, section 2.

Notice, finally, that the exercise of autonomy in the circumstances of *de facto* pluralism exacerbates the problem of practical disagreements among people, because it is more likely to lead to a divergence of views

about what to do than a convergence.¹⁰ The practical problem is not easily remedied. In some circumstances, if people's exercise of their autonomy in deciding how to act results in conflicting aspirations, a natural option for dealing with the practical problem is to arrange to have differing sets of expectations and laws in accordance with differing local loyalties and values, rather than assuming that the same norms of behaviour must prevail for everyone, everywhere. In that spirit, Nozick tells us that 'there will not be *one* kind of community existing and one kind of life led in utopia. Utopia will consist of utopias, of many different and divergent communities in which people lead different kinds of lives under different institutions' (Nozick 1974: 311–12; see also Graham 1984). But this is a solution only for examples (1) and (2) as described in section 1. In example (3), where local loyalties are not *geographically* local and people with conflicting aspirations intermingle in close proximity, it is simply unavailable as a solution.

What attitude should we take towards the diversity exhibited by *de facto* pluralism? Rawls suggests, plausibly, that it is the 'inevitable outcome of free human reason' (Rawls 1993: 37). It is, he argues, 'not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy . . . a diversity of conflicting and irreconcilable – and what's more, reasonable – comprehensive doctrines will come about and persist if such diversity does not already obtain' (36). The explanation for this is that the burdens of judgement in a modern society, including the fact that people's total experiences are very diverse, allow them to reach different views even when exercising their reason (58). Rawls's overarching question is: 'How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime?' (xviii) As for *unreasonable* doctrines, 'the problem is to contain them so that they do not undermine the unity and justice of society' (xvii). They must be contained, as he puts it, 'like war and disease' (64 n. 19).

Recall the distinction made at the end of section 1 between the practical matter of conflicting decisions about how to act and the theoretical matter of evaluating the reasons for acting which underlie such decisions. A similar distinction is apposite now between *intervention* and *criticism*. Whether someone's views are open to criticism is one thing; whether the criticism licenses some particular form of intervention (or indeed any

¹⁰ For some reasons why sponsors of autonomy should not make light of the problem of divergence, see Graham 1998: 178–80.

intervention at all) is another thing. It is consistent to believe both that some doctrine about how to act is unreasonable and that it would not be justifiable to contain it. I might believe that someone held views about what they should do which were morally undesirable or seriously self-harming, but also believe that it would be wrong to prevent them from acting on those views. For instance, perhaps I regard their personal autonomy as so important that my interfering would compound the moral undesirability, or believe that interference would serve ill their need to learn the effects of self-harm at first hand.

Rawls's talk of containing unreasonable doctrines makes it plain that he is concerned with intervention. The question 'What makes a doctrine reasonable?' obviously then assumes great importance, since on it turns the further question of whether the doctrine suffers containment or receives, as it were, a ticket to join the overlapping consensus. He avoids excluding doctrines as unreasonable without strong grounds (Rawls 1993: 59), and gives 'rather minimal necessary conditions' for passing the test of reasonableness, stating: 'It is not suggested that all reasonable doctrines so defined are equally reasonable for other purposes or from other points of view' (37 n. 38).¹¹

It is entirely appropriate to make rather minimal requirements for a doctrine to qualify as reasonable when the question of intervention is at stake, since drastic consequences will follow from any judgement to the contrary. My own purpose is rather different from Rawls's. I am concerned with criticism rather than intervention, and with doctrines about how to act, which are considerably narrower than comprehensive doctrines. The result of this separation of criticism from intervention should be a removal of inhibition on appraising views as unreasonable. Obviously it will still be necessary to give good grounds for such an appraisal, but it will be clearer that negative appraisal does not in itself amount to intervention or bespeak intolerance. (Equally, it should be clear that tolerance does not imply an absence of criticism. I might believe it important not to intervene in the expression of racist views even if I believe that the views expressed are not merely obnoxious but also erroneous.)

¹¹ A reasonable comprehensive doctrine has three main features. It involves 'an exercise of theoretical reason: it covers the major . . . aspects of human life in a more or less consistent and coherent manner. It organizes . . . values so that they are compatible with one another and express an intelligible view of the world.' It involves, secondly, the exercise of practical reason in determining priorities. And thirdly, such a doctrine 'normally belongs to, or draws upon, a tradition of thought and doctrine' (Rawls 1993: 59–60).

The distinction between criticism and intervention should not be taken to imply an absence of connection between appraisal and action, however. A negative appraisal can feed into the nexus of decision that agents themselves engage in, for example. In simpler and more concrete terms, there is still a point in telling someone if we think their reasons for acting are lousy: *they* may then change what they do even if we feel that we should not be justified in making them do so. And of course the exercise of critical assessment is important for the agent himself. If you are going to be autonomous there must be something for you to be autonomous about: you must select some considerations over others as providing you with reasons for acting. The question is what facts about us and our circumstances should have a bearing on this selection.

1.3 RELATIVISM AND UNIVERSALISM

I have so far described, in very broad terms, the modern context faced by human agents and the response to it in the form of placing a premium on autonomy. I shall not discuss that context any further or subject alternative theories of disenchantment, pluralism and autonomy to detailed analysis. Rather, from now on I take that context for granted and ask how, given the context, agents should conduct their practical reasoning. The question is an implicitly *universal* one about all human agents, regardless of their particular circumstances. As such, it may evoke suspicion from two different relativist sources. The first source is the belief that any attempt to answer it must involve an illegitimate generalisation from the position of *individual agents*. The second source is the belief that any attempt to answer it must involve an illegitimate generalisation from the position of a *particular culture*. I describe and briefly comment on these relativist positions now, in order to distinguish them from the universalist position which will inform subsequent discussion.

From the first source it might be objected that, since the practical reasons which any given agent has will depend entirely on the nature of their circumstances and themselves, what applies to one agent will not necessarily apply to another. Since one agent will differ from another in terms of the characteristics they possess, the objectives they happen to have, and so on, it will not be possible to generalise across cases. Loren Lomasky suggests:

An individual's projects provide him with a *personal* – an intimately personal – standard of value to choose his actions by. His central and enduring ends

provide reasons for action that are recognized as his own in the sense that no one who is uncommitted to those specific ends will share the reasons for action that he possesses. Practical reason is *essentially differentiated* among project pursuers . . . (Lomasky 1987: 28, cited in Gaus 1996: 142. A similar view is put forward in Gaus 1990, Part 1)

In a similar spirit, Jon Elster comments: 'There is no alternative to rational-choice theory as a set of normative prescriptions. It just tells us to do what will best promote our aims, whatever they are' (Elster 1986a: 22).

The idea that practical reasons are specific to particular agents is ambiguous. It may mean, first, that all reasons for acting are *internal* rather than *external*. That is, it may mean that the reasons which are available for a given agent depend crucially on that agent's own particular aims, that a consideration cannot figure as a reason for acting for a particular agent unless it meshes in with some aim that they have.¹² Secondly, it may mean that all reasons are *agent-relative* rather than *agent-neutral*. That is, it may mean that a consideration can figure as a reason only when it is primarily (or only) a reason for some particular person to do something. What is excluded here is the idea that there might be a reason, objectively speaking, for bringing about some state of affairs which was only derivatively a reason for someone (or anyone or everyone) to bring it about.¹³ That these distinctions cut across each other can be brought out in the following way. It might be held that all persons have a reason for looking after their immediate dependants and that their having this reason does not depend on whether doing so meshes in with their aims or not; hence, this reason is external rather than internal. At the same time it might be held that whereas *you* have a reason for looking after your dependants *I* do not have a reason for looking after *your* dependants; hence this reason is agent-relative rather than agent-neutral. The properties of internality and agent-relativity are therefore logically distinct. There are certain reasons for acting here which are operative for me but not operative for others, but this has nothing to do with my choices in the matter.

So far as the substantive issues are concerned, I do not believe that all reasons for acting must be internal or that they must be agent-relative.¹⁴

¹² For the distinction between internal and external reasons, see for example Williams 1980 and Williams 1995a: 35–45.

¹³ For the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, see for example Parfit 1984: 143, and Nagel 1986: 158–9.

¹⁴ For a systematic outline of the ways in which reasons for acting need not be merely relative to an agent's aims, see Nozick 1993: 139–51.

But suppose that they must. This would then itself be a significant truth about the circumstances of practical reasoning which human beings found themselves in – *all* human beings – and this illustrates how difficult it is actually to avoid universal claims. (Does the claim that each individual human being has unique features infringe the admonition against making universal claims or not?¹⁵) It is consistent with acknowledging important differences between agents to acknowledge that there are also invariant features of all human agents and their circumstances, which hold good across all particular contexts and ought to influence the values and courses of action which those agents adopt if they are to act reasonably. It is such invariant features which provide the focus of the present enquiry.

Consider now the second source of suspicion about basing practical reasoning on universal considerations. Michael Walzer puts forward a ‘radically particularist’ argument in opposition to what he takes to be the universalising tendency of current theories of distributive justice. He says:

Even if they are committed to impartiality, the question most likely to arise in the minds of the members of a political community is not, What would rational individuals choose under universalizing conditions of such-and-such a sort? But rather, What would individuals like us choose, who are situated as we are, who share a culture and are determined to go on sharing it? And this is a question that is readily transformed into, What choices have we already made in the course of our common life? What understandings do we (really) share? (Walzer 1983: 5)

This position at least allows that it would be intelligent for agents to raise questions which began from a consideration of universally shared characteristics, though it is clear that Walzer believes they do not and should not. But consider Richard Rorty’s pragmatist attempt to distinguish between fanaticism and a conscience worthy of respect, a distinction which will be germane to any attempt to make a critical assessment

¹⁵ Nagel argues that the ordinary process of practical deliberation presupposes objectivity and that objectivity in its turn draws us to generalisation (Nagel 1986: 149–50). Christine Korsgaard makes a similar point in connection with communitarianism. It is a standard communitarian criticism of the liberal conception of the self that it makes the self empty and abstract when in fact human beings need to conceive of themselves as members of particular communities, with particular ties and values. She comments: ‘This is an argument about how we human beings need to constitute our practical identities, and if it is successful what it establishes is a *universal* fact, namely that our practical identities must be constituted in part by particular ties and commitments’ (Korsgaard 1996: 118–19).

of reasons which agents have for acting. The criterion for the distinction, according to him,

can only be something relatively local and ethnocentric – the tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture. According to this view, what counts as rational or as fanatical is relative to the group to which we think it necessary to justify ourselves – to the body of shared belief that determines the reference of the word ‘we’. (Rorty 1991: 176–7)

On this view, there would be little point in beginning from universally shared characteristics if the only intelligible form of justification is relative to a particular group.¹⁶

As the thought experiment of section 1 has indicated, one of the difficulties with relativist doctrines is that it is precisely the reference of the word ‘we’ which has become problematic. A number of human beings may share a common life and common beliefs in all sorts of ways, and to that extent share a common culture, but yet disagree about a range of matters which issue in practical decisions. Living in the same street, working in the same factory or office, shopping in the same mall and sharing many beliefs on other matters, these do not rule out disagreements in practical reasoning. In other words, ‘we’ can be defined in terms of sharing a life and even in terms of sharing beliefs without this necessarily producing shared understandings or consensus on practical values. On the other hand, if ‘we’ are defined precisely in terms of such shared practical values, how much testing do those values receive on Rortyan assumptions? If we assume that we need to justify our views only to those who already share them, the reinforcement we receive in our convictions will be comforting but specious. We shall simply be in the position of Wittgenstein’s man who buys several copies of the

¹⁶ In contemporary debate there is a familiar extension of arguments of this kind in the name of a ‘politics of identity and recognition’. It is suggested that any attempt at universality is bound implicitly to privilege one culture over others and ignore important differences between agents in the name of some abstraction. In that spirit, for example, it is claimed that theories based on the apparently neutral conception of the rational autonomous agent in fact privilege a particular kind of human being, namely propertied, white males. For discussion of such suggestions, see Benhabib 1992: 152–68 and Taylor 1992. Whilst I do not directly address issues of a politics of identity and recognition, some of my discussion is relevant to them. In chapter 4, section 3 I argue for the importance of agents’ achieving a critical distance from themselves and the characteristics they possess. In chapter 5, section 4 and chapter 5, section 6 I draw distinctions between the different ways in which a person’s characteristics can acquire significance for practical reasoning, depending on whether an agent themselves chooses to endow them with significance, or whether they are caused to endow them with significance as a result of the actions or attitudes of others, or whether they carry significance independently of *anyone’s* actions or attitudes. On that basis, I argue for endowing our materiality with primary significance, as against such characteristics as gender and ethnicity which would normally be emphasised in a politics of identity and recognition.

same morning newspaper to assure himself that what it said is true (Wittgenstein 1953: para. 265).¹⁷

An alternative to relativism at this point is to attempt to begin where the temperature is fairly low, with considerations about human agents and their circumstances which are minimally contentious as between different cultures, and to describe those considerations in terms which are themselves minimally contentious. In other words, we must avoid parochialism both in *content* and in *form*.¹⁸ So far as content is concerned, we need to ensure that any features we take to be universal features of the situation of human agents really are such, rather than being historically or geographically local ones. We need, in other words, to show a decent regard for the range of evidence which can be turned up by historical and anthropological studies, rather than assuming that human beings and their circumstances are everywhere more or less just like us.¹⁹ So far as form is concerned, we should express any relevant putatively universal truths in terms which are themselves not parochial. They should not, at least at the outset, be described in a way which is itself prejudicial from the standpoint of particular cultures. Debates on these matters are often conducted in the currency of *moral* conceptions, and that is not necessarily an advantage because moral conceptions often are local to particular cultures.²⁰

Suppose we attempt to avoid these pitfalls by beginning only from the most general facts about human agents, facts whose existence would be acknowledged in any culture, and by describing them in as neutral a vocabulary as possible. This can be no more than a starting point. One person can be wrong, one culture can be wrong, *all* cultures can be wrong, when they begin to reason even from quite obvious and familiar general facts which hold good of all agents. Facts can be perfectly familiar and obvious while it is far from obvious what further conclusions they license or proscribe. Accordingly, although the general facts should not be described in a way prejudicial to any particular culture at the outset, there can be no commitment to saying nothing which might offend a

¹⁷ For criticism of Rorty see Calder 1998 and Geras 1995.

¹⁸ For further discussion of form and content in this connection, see Graham 1999b.

¹⁹ For further argument on that point, see the discussion of constraints of precondition in chapter 5, section 5.

²⁰ For example, some theorists have argued from universal facts about the nature of human agency to conclusions about individual rights. They may or may not be right to do so, but when the language of individual rights represents one (contentious) option in the stock of concepts of one (relatively local) culture it will require further argument to justify any conclusions couched in that particular way. For such attempts see Gewirth 1994 and Steiner 1977. For scepticism about taking rights as a starting point, see O'Neill 1996: 141–6.

given culture in the inferences which we then go on to make. It may be that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the A people and the B people of section 1, that diversity in practical attitudes is the inevitable outcome of the use of human reason in a modern, free society. For all that, the *status quo* with regard to practical reason, in terms of the reasons for acting which people take themselves to have, should not itself be taken as an unalterable given, somehow beyond the reach of critical assessment. Nothing alterable by human decision and action should have that status.

We must, in other words, reserve the right to criticise the beliefs of any individual or culture, including our own. No doubt a certain humility is appropriate when faced with a set of values which have held the allegiance of a large number of people over a significant period of time, but the possibility cannot be ruled out that some values, even if deeply and widely held, may be in some way deficient or wrong-headed.²¹ It goes without saying that if we countenance that possibility, then we must countenance it in relation to our own values as well as other people's.

As the argument proceeds, I shall attempt to show that this is indeed the case with some of the individualist values of our own culture: in various ways the thoughts informing reasons for acting inadequately reflect the social nature of human life. It is important to stress that the argument is pitched at the level of an examination of general (and quite possibly only implicit) philosophical assumptions. It would mislead the reader grossly to give the impression that a theory will be found between the covers of this book which will enable us to deliver verdicts on conflicting views of the kind expressed by the A people and the B people of the thought experiment in section 1. But I hope to be able to say something significant about the soundness of the assumptions underlying them.

There are many different forms of universalism relevant to the question of practical reasoning. As such forms go, the approach being adopted at this stage is a very modest one. It does not imply that there are any reasons for acting which are universal in the sense of being applicable to all human beings or that the soundness of reasons for acting is to be assessed by reference to universal criteria (though it will emerge later that there is much truth in both claims). It certainly does not amount to the idea that universally experienced circumstances imply that all human beings should be treated in the same way. It amounts only to the thought that it is useful to begin a theory of practical reason from universal

²¹ Charles Taylor has argued persuasively that to assume without argument that all cultures are equally valuable is not to pay respect but to condescend. Assessment of a culture as valuable must follow, not precede, a critical examination of its values (Taylor 1992: 70).

considerations, considerations about what it is like to be a human agent in any circumstances. It then remains to be seen whether anything of substance follows from this.²²

1.4 THE DISTINCTNESS OF PERSONS

Suppose, then, we wish to begin from a doctrine which possesses the universality just described, a doctrine which captures some of the unalterable features of the context of practical reasoning by specifying salient features of *all* human agents, without regard to any agent's particular characteristics or their particular circumstances. We do not have to look far for such a doctrine. Frequent appeal is made in philosophical discussion to the *distinctness of persons*, a doctrine which meets just that requirement. In this section I ask how exactly the doctrine is to be understood, and I distinguish a number of possible interpretations and a direction of dependency among them. I also raise questions about the conclusions which are thought to follow from them. The distinctness of persons seems to me the right *sort* of theory, but not the right theory. This preliminary discussion of it therefore prepares the ground for my arguments in favour of the rival idea of the *indistinctness* of persons, developed in chapters 2 and 3, which is similarly universalist but consists of a contrasting set of claims.

The doctrine of the distinctness of persons was brought into focus by Rawls, Nozick and Nagel, all around the same time, though it has longer historical roots than that.²³ In an apposite passage for our enquiry Sidgwick declared:

It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently 'I' am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual. (Sidgwick 1907: 498, cited in Brink 1997: 103)

²² For argument against the idea that uniformity of treatment follows from universalist claims, and other helpful points about the different kinds of universalism, see O'Neill 1996: 74–6. For Enlightenment-inspired defences of certain forms of universalism against current criticisms, see Assiter 1996 and Benhabib 1992. For a defence of specifically *moral* universalism, see Caney 1999. For the view that we should not use completely general arguments if our concern is to combat a scepticism which is local to our own intellectual and cultural situation, see Williams 1998.

²³ This corrects the inaccurate historical claim made in Graham 1998: 183.

Rawls argued in *A Theory of Justice* the need to give priority to individual liberty over aggregate increase in social welfare, and he criticised classical utilitarianism for supposing that all the desires of different people could be summed into one system and their satisfaction then measured. To do that ‘fails to take seriously the distinction between persons’ (Rawls 1972: 187) and ‘the plurality of distinct persons with separate systems of ends is an essential feature of human societies’ (29).

Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* in a similar vein resisted any analogy between (i) an individual sacrificing something for the sake of an overall greater good in their own life and (ii) the sacrificing of some individual for a greater social good. For, he said, ‘there is no *social entity* with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. There are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives. Using one of these people for the benefit of others, uses him and benefits the others. Nothing more’ (Nozick 1974: 32–3). Using someone in that way ‘does not sufficiently respect and take account of the fact that he is a separate person, that his is the only life he has’ (33).

Nagel similarly objected to treating the interpersonal case in the same way as the intrapersonal case, on the grounds that ‘it fails to take seriously the distinction between persons’.

It treats the desires, needs, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions of distinct persons as if they were the desires, etc., of a mass person. But this is to ignore the *significance* of the fact (when it is a fact) that the members of a set of conflicting desires and interests all fall within the boundaries of a single life, and can be dealt with as the claims of a single individual. Conflicts between the interests of distinct individuals, on the other hand, must be regarded in part as conflicts between *lives*; and that is a very different matter. (Nagel 1970: 134)

He adds: ‘To sacrifice one individual life for another, or one individual’s happiness for another’s is very different from sacrificing one gratification for another within a *single life*’ (138).

There is a level of agreement amongst these commentators. Most obviously, they all subscribe to some general form of individualism, though that form is in need of more precise articulation.²⁴ What all

²⁴ In characterising the different forms of individualism to which Rawls and Nozick are committed, Norman Care says that they ‘centrally value individual lives, and they give great moral weight to individually defined self-realizationist aspirations and projects. These are views that speak in the vocabulary of the “inviolability”, the “irreducible significance”, and the “irreplaceable worth” of individual human lives’ (Care 1987: 35). The problem is that individualism defined in these terms is critically ambiguous. Anyone would agree to giving individual lives central value: inviolability is a different matter, and the difficult question is whether there are any circumstances in which something may be more important than some individual’s life or plans.

are agreed on is that the desires, interests, etc., which cluster within an individual (say, the desires of individual *I*, no matter what they are desires *for*) have a special status as compared with the clustering of such things on some other basis (say, the desires for outcome *O*, no matter *whose* desires they happen to be). In consequence, it is thought inappropriate to treat desires, interests, etc., clustered on some other basis in the same way as if they attached to an individual. There is also agreement that utilitarianism suffers from the defect of treating desires and interests in just that inappropriate way.

However, there are also some disagreements about what follows from the distinctness of persons among its proponents. For example, although Rawls and Nozick formulate the doctrine in a similar way and agree in invoking it to dismiss utilitarianism, Nozick also invokes it to dismiss just the kind of redistributive welfarism favoured by Rawls.²⁵ In the light of this, we must conclude either that at least one of them is wrong in some of the inferences they make from the doctrine, which is perfectly possible, or else that the distinctness of persons is itself an ambiguous doctrine (or, of course, both). I shall persevere with the thought that the doctrine itself is ambiguous, that it may express several different ideas which need to be distinguished and evaluated and from which different conclusions may follow.²⁶

The doctrine might plausibly be construed in at least the following four different ways, D1 to D4.

(D1) *QUALITATIVE DISTINCTNESS: Persons considered as a species of entity are distinct from other entities.* It might plausibly be held that persons are distinct both from other animate entities and from inanimate entities in certain relevant respects. They exhibit a range of properties which are specific to them, such as intentions, desires, wishes and feelings, and perhaps most centrally of all (and connected with some of these other properties) they have the capacity for deliberative action. Other entities, it might be said, either do not exhibit these properties at all or exhibit them in a form quite different from that of individual persons.

From the thoughts expressed in D1 it might be held to follow, for example, that only individual persons are fully qualified members of

²⁵ Nozick objects in the following terms to Rawls's regarding natural talents as a common asset, such that those who by accident possess them should benefit from them only on terms that improve the situation of those who do not possess them: 'Some will complain, echoing Rawls against utilitarianism, that this "does not take seriously the distinction between persons"; and they will wonder whether any reconstruction of Kant that treats people's abilities and talents as resources for others can be adequate' (Nozick 1974: 228).

²⁶ For a similar enterprise, see Raz 1986: 271–87.

the moral realm; and that this makes it appropriate to have certain expectations about how they could reasonably be treated and to have a certain view of the responsibilities they can be expected to carry (cf. Kymlicka 1989: 241–2). The thoughts expressed in D₁ are not the most dominant in appeals to the distinctness of persons, but they are likely to underlie Nozick's avowal that there is no social entity which undergoes a sacrifice for its own good, and I believe that they have an important role in justifying some of the individualist conclusions which appeals to the doctrine are thought to support.

(D₂) *DISTINCTNESS AS SEPARATENESS: Persons considered individually, rather than as a species, are distinct from one another.* We share certain properties as members of a species, such as the capacity for thoughts, memories, experiences, actions and aspirations. But the instantiation of these properties occurs within separate individuals. My thoughts and actions and aspirations are not yours, any more than I am you. We each live a separate life, with our own separate experiences and behaviour, and our own separate views as to how that life should go. As Samuel Scheffler expresses the point: 'Different persons, each one with his own projects and plans, are distinct, though to say this is obviously not to deny the reality or importance of empathy, identification, sharing, co-operation, joint activity, and other related aspects of human experience. Indeed, as a moment's thought will show, these phenomena all presuppose the distinctness of persons' (Scheffler 1982: 77).

From the thoughts expressed in D₂ about the peculiarly intimate relation between individual human beings and their own separate experiences, actions and aspirations, a number of things might be held to follow. Experiences, actions and aspirations are closely connected with interests. (For example, if I am experiencing pain I have an interest in my experience coming to an end; if I am walking along I have an interest in the ground not giving way beneath me; if I aspire to write a detective novel I have an interest in forming some ideas about a suitable plot.) If experiences, actions and aspirations are predicated of separate individuals, then it might be claimed that a similar separateness must be involved in dealing with those individuals' interests. William Galston suggests: 'I may share everything with others. But it is *I* that shares them – an independent consciousness, a separate locus of pleasure and pain, a demarcated being with interests to be advanced or suppressed' (Galston 1986: 91).

In the light of that claim, it might then further be thought in the interests of separate individuals that they be 'free to regulate their own